

A Forever Christmas

Missy Tippens



LOVE INSPIRED
INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Chapter One



Sarah Radcliffe forced one foot in front of the other, up the front steps of her parents' church—her childhood church home—with her insides churning. She'd come as a favor for her friend, Donna Rae Durante. And though it wasn't time for a worship service, she really didn't want to go inside. She'd been angry with God for weeks. Hadn't been able to bring herself to even enter a church building.

Which was sad, because normally, walking inside gave comfort—a feeling of warmth, of peace. All of which she really needed at the moment.

But instead, the pervasive grayness wrapped around her as she took the last step leading to the church door. The cold December wind gusted as she flung it open. A cacophony assaulted her ears, reminding her of the school

hallways at the end of the day. She entered the sanctuary, and saw kids swarming all over the place, yelling and laughing.

All except for a little boy over to the side, taking it all in. Her heart immediately hurt.

The boy's straight, dark hair reminded her of her former student, Peter, but she closed off the line of thought before it got out of hand.

"Oh, Sarah, I'm so glad you came!" Donna Rae hollered from where she sat on the front pew.

Sarah waved and proceeded down the center aisle. A carrot-topped little boy zoomed across and almost tripped her.

"Sowwy," he called, then continued on his race.

Donna Rae stood and hugged her. "You're such a lifesaver."

"It's great to see you, Donna Rae." She glanced down at her friend's very pregnant belly. "You look fantastic. As usual."

Donna Rae rubbed her protruding abdomen, and worry furrowed her brow. "I'm feeling pretty good, too. But I'm swelling, and the doctor is worried about my blood pressure. Didn't have any trouble on the first four kids."

"I'm sorry. Anything I can do to help?"

She cackled. "Oh, boy, is there. That's why I asked you to meet me here."

From the looks of things—boxes of costumes lying off to the sides of the church and pieces of the set for their annual Christmas pageant—she suspected Donna Rae was fishing for volunteers to help with the play. “Uh-oh. I’m afraid I’m going to regret my offer.”

“Come over here. I need to stay off my feet.” She grabbed Sarah’s hand and pulled her down on the pew beside her. “As you can tell, I’m the director of the pageant this year. And I’m finding out just how much Lindsay Jones Wellington always did around this place.”

“Mother told me she got married and moved to Boston.”

“Yes.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “She and Bill held hands around The Forever Tree, you know.”

How could she forget the local legend that said a couple who holds hands around the tree would have forever love? “Yes, I’d heard that.” Sarah’s breathing stuttered as she remembered the time she’d held hands around the tree. With Gregory Jones.

I’ll love you forever, no matter what happens, he’d said to her as they circled the huge pecan tree in the park in downtown Magnolia, Georgia. She’d been so young. So trusting.

So naive.

“Well, I’ve been trying to fill Lindsay’s

shoes,” Donna Rae said. “And I’m afraid it wouldn’t be possible in even the best of circumstances. And now my doctor is talking about putting me on bed rest.”

Sarah shook off the remnants of her trip down memory lane. “What?”

“I’m showing signs of preeclampsia. The doc said to get my life in order. He’ll probably stick me on bed rest till the baby comes.”

“Oh, no, Donna Rae. Is the baby okay?”

“She’s fine. It’s just a precaution. I’ve asked five different people to take over for me, and although they all said they would help, not a one would agree to head it up. When I heard you were back in town, I knew you’d be perfect.”

Sarah took a deep breath.

“Oh, please say you’ll do it. You have so much experience with kids.”

The dark-haired boy caught her eye once again, as if she had radar for detecting lonely children. “Honestly, I don’t know if I can handle being around kids right now. I’m home because one of my kindergartners passed away from cancer, and they closed school early for the holidays.”

“Oh, you poor thing.” Donna Rae wrapped her arms around Sarah again. “Well, you can think about it before making a decision. My last resort is to ask Bea Kennedy to do it.”

“Do you think she could handle it?”

“Well, she’s working with kids at the community center now.”

Guilt gnawed at Sarah. Would she make a woman in her eighties take over just because it was painful for her to be around children?

Her gaze darted to the quiet boy again.

She was home from Nashville for the holidays with absolutely nothing to do. And her parents had more social engagements than she could shake a stick at—none of which interested her. How could she refuse Donna Rae? Surely she could find several volunteers to help her. Maybe it would help her to heal. She took another deep breath. “I’ll do it.”

Donna Rae grabbed her in a huge bear hug. “Bless you!”

Sarah looked around the room at the children playing in pairs or small groups. A couple of teenagers had come in and seemed to be helping corral them. The quiet little boy was still off by himself, his face the picture of misery. “Why isn’t that boy playing?”

“He’s having a tough time with Lindsay’s marriage and move.” She leaned in closer as if watching Sarah for a reaction. “That’s Hunter Jones.”

Sarah tried not to let the shock show, but she knew she couldn’t hide the surge of emotion

battering her already-tender heart. “Gregory and Delia’s son,” she whispered. “I haven’t seen him since he was a baby.” Since the time she came home for a visit and Delia brought the baby over to show him off. Of course, that was before she abandoned him a year later.

“He’s five now. And the energetic little angel with the bright red hair is Chase Jones, who’s four.”

The cute little one who’d nearly run her down when she came in?

“I don’t think Delia has any contact with them anymore,” Donna Rae whispered behind her hand.

“I’ve heard that. I just can’t believe it.”

“The boys really miss their Aunt Lindsay. She’d been their mother figure pretty much since Chase was born. Now Gregory has to do everything.”

Sarah pressed her hand to her chest. This wasn’t going to be easy. How could she not be over Gregory’s betrayal even after so many years? The stuffy sanctuary closed in, forcing her to breathe deeply. “Do you mind if I step outside for a minute?”

“Sure, take your time.” Donna Rae pointed to the pile of halos in the pew beside her. “I still need to get these untangled and bent back into shape.”

“Thanks, Donna Rae.” She wanted to race up the aisle but instead controlled her pace.

She could do this. Pouring herself into the pageant might help to take her mind off Peter’s death. Might help her climb up out of the smothering grief. She’d just take it one step at a time.

As she reached out to grab the door, it swung open.

And she stood toe-to-toe with six feet of ruggedly handsome man.

The last person she wanted to see right now. She froze.

He didn’t move either, except for his dark blue eyes, which blinked, then widened. “Sarah.”

The way he said it, so deep and raspy...so familiar...sent her stomach on a nosedive to her feet and back. “Hi, Gregory.”

Gregory could not believe he was face-to-face with Sarah Radcliffe. He’d done well to avoid her through the years on her rare trips home.

And now he’d practically run into her. The closest they’d been in a decade.

“Are you in town for the holidays?” he asked.

“We, uh...yes, school got out earlier than usual this year. So I decided to do Christmas

here instead of in Nashville.” She gestured to the sanctuary, her hands all fluttery like a nervous bird. “And now Donna Rae has asked me to take over as director of the pageant.”

He studied her for a couple of seconds, stunned by the news, yet trying to hold his stiff smile in place. “Oh. That’s...nice.”

He tried his best not to stare. To act as if it were no big deal to see her again. But he couldn’t help it. Beyond all reason, she was even more beautiful at thirty-two than she’d been as a teenager. Her hair was still long and blond, her eyes that warm, light brown. He had once thought they seemed to have light behind them.

He used to wonder if God gave her that glow. Used to resent it at the same time he wanted it.

But now, the light wasn’t there. She seemed... sad.

“Gregory, what are you doing back so soon?” Donna Rae asked as she lumbered up the aisle.

He slowly dragged his attention to Donna Rae. “I’m actually here to beg you for a favor.” He held up two car booster seats, one in each hand. “Can you take the boys to my dad’s house after rehearsal? I just got a call to meet a potential client and won’t be back in time.”

“Sure. Just put the seats in my car for me.”

“Thanks. I owe you one.” He scanned the room for his boys. Chase was fine, playing with friends. But Hunter sat alone. It killed him to see his son so unhappy.

Donna Rae shooed him out. “Go ahead. We’ll take care of him.”

He glanced at Sarah, then nodded, his mind racing.

Sarah Radcliffe. Here in Magnolia.

Directing the Christmas play.

Unbelievable.

As he installed the booster seats and then drove to his meeting, he tried not to think about her or the sadness clinging to her.

They’d had such a roller-coaster past. He’d been crazy about her from the moment he laid eyes on her. He’d had big plans, including marriage. But then she’d dumped him—because her judgmental parents had thought he wasn’t good enough for their little princess.

She had no idea what that rejection had done to him.

And then there had been all that stuff with her dad. Gregory still prayed no one would find out about it.

But he couldn’t dwell on it. He had work to do. He padlocked all thoughts of Sarah. Relegated them to the painful past. The better-left-unopened past.